

WHILE THE BOMBS FALL

Written for "The Listener" from London

by JOHN GUTHRIE

THE stout woman with yellow hair in the eating stall by Charing Cross, said: "That will be 4d., ducky," and the boy who bought the pie blushed furiously. He was still too young to enjoy being called ducky. The woman turned again to the two bus conductors. "And after this old war," she said gaily, "it will be the same as last time. You'll see. Last time it was going to be a land fit for heroes to live in. This time, too. Not half." She laughed with great delight. "It will be different this time," said one of the conductors. "This time we've got some of our men in the Government. There's Bevin." The woman with the yellow hair laughed again. She was one of London's choicest and best. "You chaps!" she said. She turned to me. "I've got my own private war with these chaps. When the siren goes and my bus stops, I say, 'I gave you tuppence to take me to a place and you haven't got me there. You give me my tuppence back. Don't half kick up a fuss, I don't. I'm having a lovely war!'"

FROM Charing Cross I went down to Aldgate. It was Sunday, and market day in Petticoat Lane. The bus went down past the Church of St. Clement Dane, past the Law Courts, through Fleet Street, and circled St. Paul's for an unexploded time-bomb. There was no sign of damage all that way, after three weeks of bombing. In the road outside the great bronze doors of the Bank of England, men were filling the crater of a bomb. I remembered that there used to be a saying, "As safe as the Bank of England."

Through narrow streets between tall buildings we went in the City proper. A few of the tall buildings were gutted with fire; not many. "Thirty people were buried last night in that one down there," said the conductor. The sun was shining that morning, but not for thirty people. Down by Petticoat Lane people thronged the streets, Jews, Lascars from ships, some negroes. The girls went past in their Sunday morning make-up, gallant, not artistic. The people walked past five or six huge blocks where the buildings had been smashed to bits. It was the hot spot of London, this. But the shops were open, and in Petticoat Lane the queer old market went on. From a wrecked radio shop came music and the

spectacle of a placard: "Murphy's Message for To-day:—Carry on, London."

The sirens sounded then for the first time that Sunday. Some of the buses go on running, some don't. One is going past me into town. I get on board. As we come near the City proper, a woman getting off says to the conductor: "Where is the Mansion House, please?" "First to the right, lady. Last time I saw it, it was there!"

THE bus comes to Piccadilly Circus, and here a crowd stands under the arches, looking up. The German 'planes are whining above. Britain's fighters rip through the white clouds and glint in the sun, swift and dangerous. Beside me, a middle-aged woman in a grey coat and skirt cries, "Look, look!" Up there, a black 'plane breaks into pieces in the sky, falls in flames. "It broke into thousand of bits," she cries. Her excitement was febrile, she was shaking with it and seizing people by the arm. She shouted to strangers: "Did you see it, wasn't it a sight! Wasn't it wonderful! Wasn't that beautiful!"

This is an unhealthy excitement that takes some women and children, and I daresay some men, in the sights and sounds of combat. It seizes them and shakes them. They become abnormal. I have seen six little children dancing

Knight-Errant

*My son has gone with a
brave, brave thought,
And a purpose bold and
grand—*

*To fight as his Anzac Father
fought,
For the freedom of his land;
I said "God Speed" with a
mother's fear,
A prayer, and a smile to hide
a tear.*

*My love has gone as his
Lady's Knight,
With a courage proud and
high,
For Country's cause, and me,
to fight,
And a maid bereft am I—
For my crusader over the sea,
Has marched away with the
heart of me!*

—Harold Gallagher
Wellington.



SO THIS IS AUSTRALIA: Saved from the conditions described by John Guthrie in this article, these two young evacuees from Britain take in the beauty of Sydney Harbour soon after their arrival aboard a liner. They seem homesick but happy

up and down on the pavement of a dirty back street, crazy with some inner excitement just after the sound of the guns.

After the 'plane falls a parachute drifts down out of the sky, very slowly, with infinite patience, like a stray puff of cloud, and a small figure depends from it. What games men play, what strange things happen to-day in the London sky. The City of yesterday was so staid and sober, you'd think this sort of thing a prank. You have to pinch yourself as you think: "Does this sort of thing really happen over London?"

FROM Piccadilly, the bus goes down Chelsea way, and takes unaccustomed turnings, for some streets are barred off and men are clearing wreckage. But it is only here and there, so far—enough to surprise one still. The buses cross the River Thames at Albert Bridge and pass Battersea Power Station, still untouched. It is mostly small shops and houses that are caved in. The poor are born to suffer. When the next alarm goes this bus stops and deposits its passengers at a shelter. "Take cover," roars a warden. In the sky above a black bomber with the finned German tail, goes slowly over our heads but drops no bombs.

You look up in wonder at the odd sight, and then remember that others too have looked up in wonder until something fell and they looked up no more, ever. You feel a tickling in the stomach and move to an archway.

ANOTHER bus, whose driver has not stopped, picks up passengers and trundles us back to Marble Arch, Hyde Park. Here, on the corner, is the looneybin of London, where men and women argue in crazy fashion on problems that have vexed all mankind. The arguments are still going on, the orators orate, the raid is ignored. They are talking too earnestly about Fifth Columnists and

God and the Cost of Living. Their poor puzzled thoughts soar far beyond and above bombers. The usual idle crowd listens, laughs or jeers. It is fairly safe in the open, among the trees sunburning to autumn now. The people don't even notice the All Clear.

IN the last hour in London there is still Buckingham Palace to see and the chill thought, as always now in viewing London landmarks, that next time one comes it may not be the same. Workmen are repairing the road between the Victoria Monument and the Palace railings. Two bombs have missed the Palace by a bare forty yards. But it is restful here now, with the late afternoon sun fine and warm, and it is good to watch the willows by the lake in St. James's Park, and the red glow of the geraniums in the flower-pots in the grass. Sunday's peace at last. Then bang, bang, bang! All at once and on top of one's head. There is the usual staggering moment and the rapid query, "Am I still alive?" The bomb had fallen near apartments at the back of the Palace, though the King and Queen were absent that day. Black smoke curls up. It is no longer possible to contemplate the geraniums with the same serenity. The day of rest, but not for London.

ON the coach going back to the country that evening, a little old woman says: "My son has made me leave London. I don't want to go, I feel like a refugee. I've got my home and my little comforts. They're not much to others but are everything to me. It's not the same, living with other people. I see he's been bombing the Palace. Trying to get the King and Queen. They can't help being King and Queen, they're good people. Why does he bomb the poor? They don't do anyone any harm. Why does he bomb the poor people?"